

# Hindu Temples in Go Thap Dong Thap Province, Vietnam

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## Abstract

So far we know that Indian culture had a very much influence in that of Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam. Especially, Hindu culture reflects through architectural and sculptural arts as well as other aspects of life. In Vietnam, we found that OcEo culture belonging to Funan kingdom in Southern Vietnam shows deep imprints of Indian culture underlying in its architectural and sculptural arts. This comes into light thanks to archaeologists, who have excavated and unearthed many archaeological sites of this culture located in the South of Vietnam. This article tries to prove that in OcEo culture, there are certain kind of temples which are exactly the same as that in India. And they also underwent the same stage of development as that of India. These findings based on my own excavations in archaeological site of Go Thap, Dong Thap province, Vietnam. I have spent seven years excavating this site and found that these architectural structures were Hindu temples, not tombs as claimed by Đào Linh Côn. Besides, I strongly claim that the archaeological site of Go Thap was temples of Surya, Vishnu and Shiva based on their objects found at the site; moreover, Anna Aleksandra Slaczka also posed a question that “The brick structures of Go Thap- tombs or temples?” [1] and she proved that it was temple not tomb.

**Keywords:** Hindu temple; hindu temple in Dong Thap.

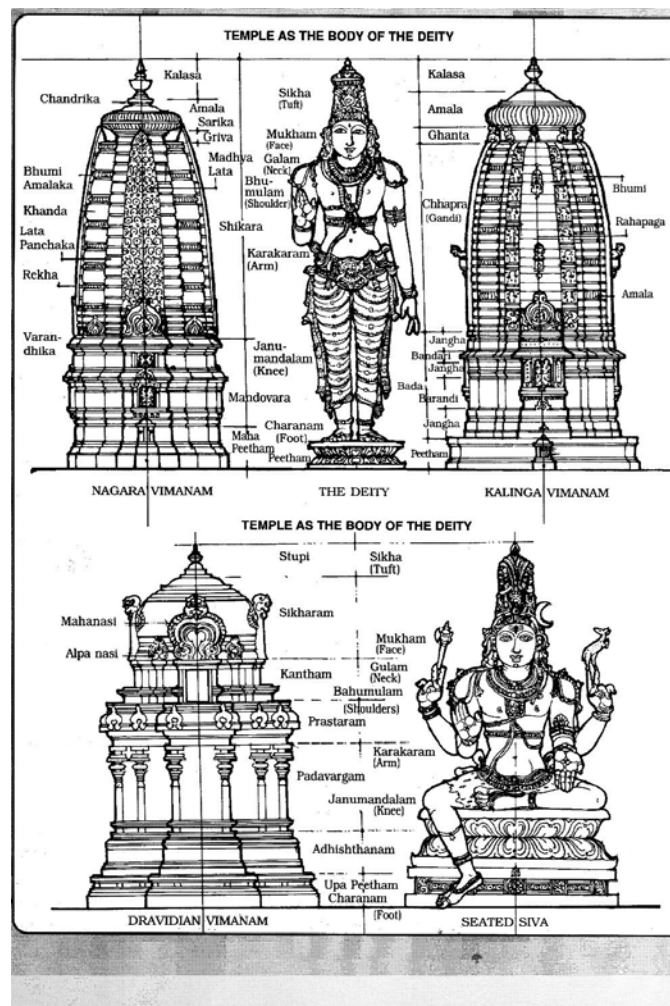
## 1. Introduction

Temples were built for worshipping gods or they are considered the dwelling place of God and Goddess; and Hindu temple is truly a house of God. Sanskrit words such as Mandir or Prasada (Sanskrit: मन्दिर mandir, प्रासाद prāsāda) [2] and Alayam in Tamil language are close in meaning to the concept of Temple in English [3] and mean a visual result of religious enthusiasm of individuals or the whole community. Temple is also considered a bridge between man and God. The word *Alayam* was formed by two words i.e. *Atma* + *Layam* meaning a dwelling place for souls.

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In Indian history, Alayam was a religious base in ancient times playing a part in forming culture. Which was not only religious life of Hindu people but it also was their cultural heritage. During the course of Indian history, temples were continuously remarkable in Hindu people's religious lives and a number of temples have still been existing to serve as god worshipping place. Hindu temples are a mirror for Hindu culture [4]. Hindu temples embody the philosophical symbolism. Temple is as the body of the Deity. In North India, temples intended to rise above, so Hindu temple is considered a standing god as in Kalinga style, a later style in North India. Meanwhile, with Dravida style in South India, temple is considered to be lower, so Hindu temples are a sitting god as Shiva is sitting on a base (Seated Shiva). Temples as god's body despite standing or sitting all have Sikha - tuft, Mukham - face, Galam - neck, Bhumulam - shoulder, Karakaram - arm, Janumandalam - knee, and Chraman - foot (Figure1). With a more complex structure of temple with Gopuram or Mahamandapam, etc.,



**Figure 1:** Temple as the body of God

it is considered god in a lying position, in which Vimana is considered the head of god, Mahamandapam neck and chest of god, Adhikara Nandi, Bali Peetham next part, Dwajastambham supporting pillars, Prakaram yard and god's stomach, and the last, Gopuram as god's feet. According to Tantric Yoga, at this position, there are seven Charkas on god's body: on the head is Sahasrara, head is Ajina, neck is Visuddha, chest is Anahata, stomach is Manipura and Swadhisthan, and thigh is Muladdhara (figure 2) [4].

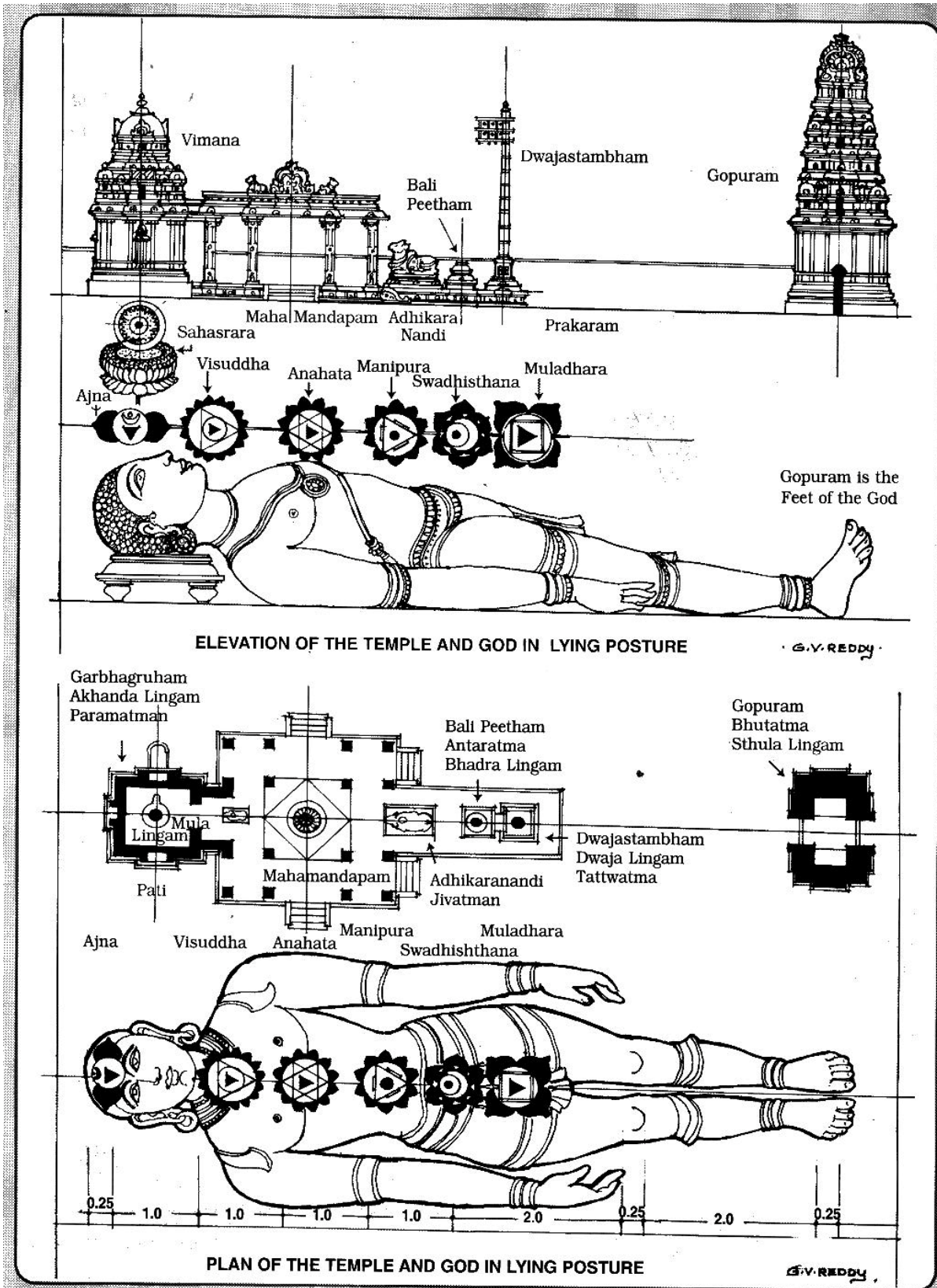


Figure 2: Elevation of God in lying position Source: G. Venkataramana (2010), p.65

In early history of India (Maurya - Sunga - Kusana: 400 B.C.E - 100 C.E.), Indian people worshipped in open-air shrines, or that worshipped objects were often placed under holy trees or near rivers was popular; places of

worship and symbols of worship were originated and inherited from Indus - Sarasvati civilization and Veda tradition[5].

In South India, there are five types of temple as follow:

- **Hypaethral Temples:** They were early temples worshipping at the trees (tree-worship) which were considered the abode of gods and souls. Tree-temple i.e. vriksha-chaiya and such worship originated from Harappa culture.
- **Roofed Temples:** roofed temples with light materials such as woods and bricks were decorated with rich paintings. The excavations at Nagarjunakonda of king Ikshvaku (the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> C.E.) showed that it was Shiva temple, Vishnu temple, Kartikeya and Devasena temple.
- **Structural Stone Temples:** They were popular in Chalukya times (543-753 AD).
- **Monolithic Vimanas-Rathas or Viman Temples:** They were sculptured from a solid stone existing since the 7<sup>th</sup> C.E belonging to Pallava kingdom (275-897 AD).
- **Rock Cut Cave Temples – Layana:** They first belonged to Buddhism. Later, Hinduism and Jainism also had their temples cut into rocks [6].

Oc Eo culture in Vietnam was deeply influenced by Indian culture, hence Hindu temples in OcEo culture have similar development as that of Hindu temples in India. OcEo culture reflected the development of the following three types of temple:

- First, temples were simply built in stone or brick in open-air (open-air shrines) or Hypaethral Temple. At the center of the temple, there was only clay (Surya temple at ThapLinh South Temple – Dong Thap province); had a pottery jar (Shiva temple at South Linh Son Temple – An Giang province); usually had a Swastika-shaped pillar (Vishnu and Shiva Temple registered as 85ĐN-M2 in Da Noi – An Giang province) put some gold and precious stone objects symbolizing gods.
- Second, temples were more completely built in brick, with wood, leaves or stone roofs (Roofed Temple). A stone sculpture of god was put at the center of the temple such as Vishnu Temple at Go Thap Muoi – Dong Thap province.
- Finally, temples were highly built with stone and brick structure (Structural Brick and Stone Temple). There are stone sculptures or symbols of god such as Vishnu Temple with Vishnu sculpture and Shiva temple with Linga at BinhThanh Temple – Tay Ninh province.

Go Thap site in Dong Thap province, Vietnam has only two types of temples i.e Hypaethral Temple and Roofed Temples.

## 2. Hypaethral Temple

### 2.1 Surya Temple

Surya god was one of ancient gods worshiped by many peoples in the world, especially those who had

agriculture as their occupation. In agriculture, the sun is one of the natural elements having big influence on productivity. The sun is very essential for life on earth, the survival of man. For example, for Egyptians, Ra god was their Surya being father of their other gods; in India, Sun god had existed since Veda times. Sun god was called Surya or Aditya. It was Surya who had yellow hair and arms, riding on a dawn carriage carried by seven horses. Similarly, Helios of the Greek was Surya, a son of sky goddess, Aditi, and light god, Dyaus. Surya was a king with his own kingdom, that was the sun city *Vivsvati*, *Vivasvati* means “the owner of sun rays”. Surya was also known as *Dina-Kara*, meaning a person who made days and *Karma-Sakshi* meaning “a witness of good deeds” [7]; Vietnamese people worshiped the sun since Hung Vuong king time, with the left evidence of star symbols on bronze drums; the tribes with stilt communityhouses in high land area such as stilt houses at To Mat village, Dong cummune, Kbang district, Gia Lai province decorated sun symbols at the two sides of their house roofs; or in side the stilt houses at De Nghe Lon village, Kon Chro town, Gia Lai province were decorated with the sun rays [8].

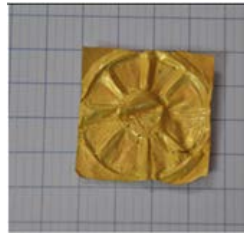
- **South Thap Linh Surya Temple** : was discovered and excavated in June and July 2010 (10GT.H11). The architectural vestige is located at  $10^{\circ}36.274'$  north latitude and  $105^{\circ}49.677'$  east. The temple was built in brick in East-West direction with 16.80m length, 9-meter width in North South direction, door in the East. The whole structure was a solid built in bricks, including red brown and yellow with  $30 \times 15 \times 8$ cm and the sticking material was a mixture of sand and clay. In the center of the temple of hole 11, at the depth of 0.2m, stone in round shape was found. That was the sign of Surya temples in some places of the world (figure 3). Under this round stone gradually became smaller and smaller in funnel shape and at the bottom at 1.37m two gold leaves were found: one in sun round shape with 8 rays or a wheel with 8 spokes of suryacart (Figure 4) and one with sun-rayshape. Gold sun shape/surya wheel was found at hole 11 is quite similar to stone wheel in Konarak temple in Orissa, India built by KingNarasimhadeva (1236-1264) in sandstone [9]. It can be said that, finding symbols as stone round shape built above and gold sun with 8 spokes/8-spoke-wheel underneath proved that hole 11 was Surya temple.



**Figure 3:** Surya temple south thap Linh

Source : Dang Van Thang (Author)





**Figure 4:** Gold with 8 rays or a wheel with 8 spokes of Surya cart

Source : Dang Van Thang

**-Local Goddess Knoll Surya Temple ( Gò Bà Chúa Xứ):** located in Northeast direction 575m from Thap Muoi knoll. The knoll was in quadrilateral shape and 3,500m<sup>2</sup> in size. The peak of the knoll is 3.96m above sea level, 1.5 higher than rice field. Located at 10°36'29.61" north and 105°49'49.61" east, it was built in brick 20.9m long in East-West direction (10° orientating South) , 13.4m width in North-South direction (10° orientating East) belonging to architecture with angled sides, symmetric between North and South parts. On the surface of the structure was built as square shapes like a chess table, a kind of Manduka mandala (figure 5), in the center of which there have a sun shape with 8 spokes arranged by 8 bricks pointing to 4 main directions and 4 additional directions [10]. The whole temple is brick structure, the thickest place is 1.4m. The materials were gray, brown-red, and red bricks. Bricks with gig six were in west area and under the lower layers of the site bricks were 32x18x9.5cm (type 1); 30x15x8cm (type 2); and 27x13x8cm (type 3), 24x13x7cm (type 4)[11] . Based on the plan with different size and materials, we can claim that Ba Chua Xu Surya temple was under gone 3 times of restoration and renovation. Besides, also in this site, a stone Surya sculpture was found and kept at Ho Chi Minh cityHistory Museum with registered No. BTLS 5499, dated back the 6<sup>th</sup> C.E.[12]This strengthens the hypothesis that in the center, among temples there was at least one temple for Surya and at Go Thap site, It could be that there were two structures i.e. 10GT.H11 belonging to the early period, eight sun-ray gold leaves was put underground – According to G. Coedès, burying precious objects under the temple or the altar was an ancient practice in India, which was applied in several countries when establishing pillars of Simas temple<sup>1</sup> and at Local Goddess temple (Miếu bà Chúa Xứ), in developed period, a Surya sculpture was put at above.



**Figure 5:** Plan of Local Goddess Surya Temple

Source: Management Board of Go Thap Site



**Figure 6:** Bricks planned as sun rays

Source: An Giang Museum

## ***2.2 Shiva and Vishnu Temple***

In Hinduism, Vishnu maintains the universe (when Vishnu sleeps, the creation withdraws in a seed then from that it arises again when he wakes up); Vishnu is considered to have many forms, he is one of the three gods (Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva) of Hinduism. Vishnu holds a plate symbolizing the wisdom of the sun, but the sun symbolizes for the governance over the universe; holding a snail cover symbolizing the sound “ $\Omega$ ” basic vibration from which there is a creation. This snail cover is blown at temples to mark the presence of Vishnu; holding a lotus symbolizing the purity of the universe as well as the fertility. Lakshmi, wife of Vishnu, is usually described as sitting on a lotus; holding a mace symbolizing ancient knowledge and wisdom competence i.e. control, power and order maintenance. Shiva has ability of creation, maintenance and destruction. Shiva is usually symbolized in Linga, male capacity, which was surrounded by a yoni, female surviving source[13]. Shiva (Sanskrit:शिव, *Śiva*, meaning auspices) is an important god of Hinduism and is an aspect of Trimurti. Shaiva sect considers Shiva as the highest God. Shiva is symbolized in Shiva-linga. Among sculptured pictures, Shiva is usually symbolized in stage of deep meditation or dancing Tandava on Maya, which shows the operation of the universe [14].

## ***2.3 Vishnu and Shiva temple 93GT.M1***

Discovered at the depth of 3.0m from the layer of land field, located at the middle of a plain built with clay and sand together with broken bricks. At the center of the hole there was a square hole, 1.9m width and 0.4m depth. The hole was built by five layers of red bricks, each layer has 4 bricks (25.5cm x 13cm x 6cm) arranged in svastika shape with a square hole in the middle, 0.32m high, each side is 0.4m width.

In the square hole, 49 small gold leaves and 1 precious orange stone were found in bright gray sand layer[10], in which there were 33 gold leaves carved with pictures. The content carved in the gold leaves was Chakra (a symbol of Vishnu), Vahara (an avatar of Vishnu), Kurma (an avatar of Vishnu), Matsya (an avatar of Vishnu), Vajra (symbol of Shiva). Hence, 93GT.M1 is temple of Vishnu and Shiva.

### **3. Vishnu and Shiva temple 93GT.M3**

The structure is a rectangular plan, built in brick, 10m long in East-west direction, 6.2m width in North-south direction, it includes 2 big rooms and a small room at the East side. The hole was discovered at the middle of the room in the west with the surface of intact bricks, each side with 3.34m and 0.615m depth. The wall was a kind of sticky gray sand with wood ashes. At the middle of the hole there was a square pillar with each side of 0.46m width, 0.545m height, built by seven layers of bricks, each layer has 4 bricks of square shape with a square hole linking from the bottom to nearly the surface, in which the most bottom layer was built by white-grey bricks (32cmx16cmx7cm). The objects found included 34 gold leaves and an orange agate necklace [10]. The content carved in the gold leaves include chakra and lotus (symbols of Vishnu and Lakshmi), Sesa (riding object of Vishnu), Vajra (symbol of Shiva). Hence, 93GT.M3 was proved to be a temple of Vishnu and Shiva.

### **4. Temple of Vishnu and Shiva 93GT.M4**

Located in the South, about 8m far from 93GT.M3, discovered at the depth of 0.4m as compared to the present surface. The hole has square plan, paved with bricks, each side is of 1.27m. At the middle and the depth of 0.53m, it was built by 6 layers of bricks, each layer has 4 bricks arranged in square shape with a square hole in side making the whole structure look like a platform with one step. Objects found include 56 gold leaves, 3 precious stones, 7 blue pieces of glass and pieces of bronze [10]. The content carved in gold leaves are Vishnu (Vishnu holding a snail in his left hand, chakra in his right hand), chakra (symbol of Vishnu), Garuda (riding object of Vishnu), Linga (symbol of Shiva). Hence, 93GT.M4 was claimed to be a temple of Vishnu and Shiva.

### **5. Temple of Vishnu and Shiva 93GT.M5**

9m far from 93GT.M4 in the south, discovered at the depth of 0.25m as compared to the present harvesting field. The square hole is of 2m width, the clay wall is of 0.93m depth. In the heart of the hole was a solid square pillar, built by 11 layers of bricks, each layer has 4 bricks (30cmx16cmx7cm) arranged in square shape with a square hole linking from the bottom to the surface. Objects found include 72 gold relics, 2 gold rings and 1 precious stone [10]. The content carved on the gold leaves were chakra (symbol of Vishnu), chakra and sankha (symbols of Vishnu), Sankha (symbol of Vishnu), Shankha and lotus (symbols of Vishnu and Lakshmi), lotus (symbol of Lakshmi), Garuda (riding object of Vishnu), Mtcha (avatar of Vishnu), Nandin (riding object of Shiva). Therefore, 93GT.M5 was claimed to be a temple of Vishnu and Shiva.

### **6. Temple of Vishnu and Shiva 10GT.H10**

Excavated in 2010, located at 10°36.247' north and 105°49.669' east, 30m far from Thap Muoi knoll, with the structure of 11.10m built in brick in East-West direction, 7.56m width in North-South direction. The temple architecture had door opened in the East (10° orientating North). At the middle of the structure, at the depth of 40cm as compared to the surface, 5m far from the west wall, a brick pillar in Swastika shape was found including 5 layers (the above layer collapsed), the square pillar was constructed by 4 bricks, with a square hole at the middle. Although no gold objects were found in the pillar, as compared with other structures underground as mentioned above, it can be that 10GT.H10 belonged to the early period and to be a temple of



Vishnu and Shiva.

## **7. Temple of Vishnu 93GT.M2**

Having a plan of rectangular shape, 9.0m long in East-West direction, 6.20m width in North-South direction, built in solid brick (27cm x 14cm x 7cm), 2-3 layers thick. The base was of average 0.8m width, the two sides at South and North were intact, the side at East-west direction collapsed completely. The hole at the middle in the West was in square shape, each side of 2m width, 0.8m depth, having the sticky grey sand-clay wall. The center was a pillar built in brick in svastika shape, each side of 0.42m width, 0.69m height, built by 9 layers of brick, each layer has 4 bricks arranged in square shape with a square hole at the middle. Objects found include 12 small gold leaves located in soft white sand at the center of the square pillar [10]. The content carved on gold leaves were charka (symbol held in hand of Vishnu). Therefore, 93GT.M2 was claimed to be a temple of Vishnu.

## **8. West Thap Linh Temple of Shiva**

Built by solid bricks, 20.8m long in East-west direction ( $90^0$  orientating north), 13.9m width in North-South direction. The temple has angled sides, symmetric between the north and the south approaching the East-West pole, the door opened in the East. At the part of North-West, the foundation has sides angled three times and symmetric with the South-West part. In the South-east part, it is angled for 7 times and symmetric with the North-east part. These angled sides make the structure have 20 angles and 36 unequal sides (long and short), in which the two north and south sides were the longest with 9.75m, the east side 8.82m, the west side 9.28m. At position 2/3 of the east-west long, 1/2 to the north-south of the current temple, is a well known as the "Great Well, Hoang Co", this is a Step Pond in Hindu architecture, just as the case of the temple of Shiva Go Don (Binh Ta, Long An province), was renovated by the later generations as a well. Because of the structure with a step pond at the position 2/3 East-west long similar to the architecture of the Shiva Go Don temple, we can claim that it is a kind of Shiva West Thap Linh temple.

The temple was built and renovated three times. In the first time, the architecture had the long of 18m with three layers of red brick (33 x 16 x 7.5 cm; 33 x 16.5 x 7.5 cm; 33 x 17 x 7 cm; 34 x 17 x 6 cm; 35 x 17 x 6 cm; 35 x 17 x 7 cm.) In the second time, the architecture had the long of 17.10m. The bricks were grey with higher fluctuating amplitude than the South, North, West sides. There appeared some bricks with small size even smaller than the bricks of the first renovation (29 x 15 x 7 cm; 31 x 15 x 6 cm; 32 x 15 x 8 cm; 33 x 18 x 7 cm; 39 x 19 x 8 cm; 39 x 19 x 9 cm.) The bricks were easily to be worn out due to clay mixed with sand, hence, it is necessary to protect and preserve the architecture immediately. The white bricked ground unearthed for 4-5 days tended to appear some cracks on the surface and turn to be worn out. It is so, in order for excavations to link with preservation, it had better excavate the four sides of the temple and found the south and north edges of the temple almost symmetrical, so only excavate 1/2 of the temple to the south. The rest will be preserved intact contributing to preservation of the site better. In the final renovation, the east side of the temple was expanded with the long of 20.80m. The supplement included clay and scattered bricks, which was very hard and its structure was 50cm thick, on the surface was two layers of purple-red bricks and orange bricks. The sample 15GT-H8 (250cm) registered by the laboratory with HCM39/15 had a result:  $1640 \pm 80$ BP, i.e. in 310 AD.

Later, the temple was continuously used and rennovated' it can be siad that the temple was used until the 12<sup>th</sup> C.E.

## 9. Roofed Temple

### 9.1Thap Muoi Knoll Vishnu Temple

ThapMuoi Knoll is the highest one in the area belonging to Go Thap Site. It is nearly in a quare shape with the size of 4.500m<sup>2</sup>. Its peak is 7.92m as compared to the see level and 3.8m higher than the rice field. Located at 10<sup>0</sup>36'17.44" North and 105<sup>0</sup>49'41.28" East. On the surface of the knoll there are many architectural stones, several stone worshipped objects, and broken brickces. The clearest vestige of the architecture was the brick architecutre with the long of 17.30m in East-West direction, 12m width (North-South), the sides were angled, symmetric in North-South parts, showing it is of large scale and related to other surrounding architectures. In 1998, the excavation at the based walls found two standing sculptures of Vishnu. The first sculpture registered as BTĐTCV451/Đ78, dated back to the late 7<sup>th</sup> century AD (figure 7). The second sculpture dated back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD (figure 8) and both were regconied as The National Preciou Objects. In 2015, the path leading to the temple and the North part of the temple were excavated. Also in the same year, a Stepped Pond was found at the angle of North-East before the ThapMuoi Knoll Vishnu Temple. In 2016, the paths of the east and the South of the temple were excavated, amazingly the Mandapaarchitecutre was found at the East in fornt of the temple. With the two Vishnu sculptures found at the Go Thap temple, it can be claimed that ThapMuoi knoll is Vishnu Temple. And with the finding of Mandapa in front of the temple, it is possible that ThapMuoi Vishnu Temple is Vishnu Temple of lying God.



**Figure 7:** Vishnu 6th C.E – ĐồngTháp Museum

Source: ĐặngVănThắng



**Figure 8:** Vishnu 7th C.E – ĐồngTháp Museum

Source: Đặng Văn Thắng

### **9.2 Minh Su Knoll Shiva Temple**

Minh Su knoll is in the middle of ThapMuoi knoll and Local Goddess one. Located  $10^{\circ}36'22.55''$  North and  $105^{\circ}49'48.32''$  East, its peak is 7.01m high as compared to the sea level. The architecture has a near square shape, high in the center and gradual lower in all sides. With the size of  $1.250\text{m}^2$ , its surface has many pieces of ancient pottery, scattered of architectural stones, sculptures' legs, etc. Minh Su knoll is a kind of large scale architecture, having walls built surrounding with caly and pieces of bricks in the middle making it a high temple. The center architecture is of a high temple, structured by two solid square continuing one after another in East-West direction ( $20^{\circ}$  Orientating South). In the west solid square has a side of 14.95m long, the solid square in the East built upon the architecture, each side was 4-4.20m long making the whole central architecture a one-time-angled form and symmetric between the North and South through the East-West pole. The balcony outside the architecture has rectangular shape with the size of  $24\text{m} \times 19\text{m}$  in North-South direction. The rectangular walls surrounding outside were 34m long in East-West direction, 32.4m width in North-South direction.

The gopura architecture located in the east with the size of  $4.10\text{m} \times 3.9\text{m}$  in the East-West direction. Minh Su Knoll had undergone three different stages of development from the 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> C.E. In the excavation, scientists have found many relics reflecting the feature of this site: a stone somasutra was found on the surface of the site, which is similar to that of Go Don Site (Binh Ta, Long An province)[10] or An Loi Go Thap Site, An Loi, Chau Lang Commune, Tri Ton district, AnGiang province, dated back to 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> C.E. Somasutra, which is indispensable in offering ceremony to gods, especially Shiva, has become a unique sign for recognizing Shiva Temple. A part of yoni was also found in this Site. Behind the temple, 89m far from it, at the temple of Uma goddess (Durga, Parvati – wife of Shiva), many gold objects were found. A Stepped Pond was also found at the North-East angle in front of the temple. These objects together with the architecture plan prove that Minh Su Knoll was a temple of Shiva.

## 10. Conclusion

So far we have found more than ten temples of gods with two types of architecture in Go Thap site:

- (1) Hypaethral Temple: the temple was built simply in bricks with a pillar in the center underground, in side of which contains gold leaves craved with pictures of gods such as South ThapLinh Surya temple 10GT.H10, Temple of Vishnu and Shiva 93Gt.M1, Local Goddess Surya Temple, etc.
- (2) Roofed temple: the temple was built by stucco made by clay mixed with soft sand, above of which there were stone sculptures of Hinduism like ThapMuoi Vishnu temple, Minh Su Shiva temple, etc.

However, we need to do more excavations at archaeological site of Go Thap and other parts of OcEo culture to support our findings. Case studies at Hindu temples in Go Thap not only contributes to studying and more understanding them in area of Oc Eo-Ba The, An Giang province, in Go Thanh-Tien Giang province, in Binh Ta-Long An province, etc which belong to Oc Eo culture but it also plays an important role in studying Funnan Kingdom, a very ancient kingdom in Vietnam and South East Asia.



**Figure 9**



**Figure 10**

## **Acknowledgement**

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